GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL ON DISABILITY

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GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL ON DISABILITY

LEGISLATIVE SESSION UNDERWAY: WAYS TO GET INVOLVED

by Claudia Browner

The legislative session is currently underway, marking a critical time for shaping state policy and funding priorities. Budget hearings have already begun, giving lawmakers the opportunity to review proposals and consider investments that impact communities across the state.

As the session moves forward, public participation remains an essential part of the legislative process. Citizens, advocates, and stakeholders are encouraged to stay informed and engage as decisions are made that affect programs, services, and resources statewide.

There are several meaningful opportunities to get involved this session. The **Legislative Education Project (LEP**) offers tools and training to help individuals understand how the legislature operates and how to effectively communicate with elected officials. These resources are designed to support both new and experienced advocates in making their voices heard. Learn more on the LEP website.

In addition, **Disability Rights Legislative Day (DRLD)** provides a focused opportunity for people with disabilities, family members, service providers, and advocates to engage directly with policymakers. Participants can learn about key issues, share lived experiences, and help elevate disability-related priorities during the legislative session. DRLD will be held February 25 at the State Capitol. Visit the DRLD website to learn more.

With budget discussions underway and legislation advancing, now is the time to engage. Attending hearings, participating in educational opportunities, and connecting with legislators are impactful ways to take part in the democratic process and help shape policies that strengthen our communities.

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SENATE ACCESSIBILITY EFFORTS

by Laura Mueth

As many may know, the House of Representatives has made participating in their proceedings accessible to everyone. The Senate is not as accessible as it could be. Senator Mike Moon has been working to change this. Again this year, he filed a resolution to modify a Senate rule to allow for an audio and video feed of Senate proceedings.

Recognizing the need for a collective effort, a group of statewide organizations working with people with disabilities have joined together to educate senators regarding the need for overall accessibility of senate proceedings. This includes debate of bills on the Senate floor, bill hearings, and online submission of bill testimony.

Group members designed an educational handout to share with senators. Members of the group spent time in December 2025 and January 2026 meeting with senators and senate staff to advocate for better accessibility at the Senate. The group has the goal of educating every senator on this concern.

Some progress has already been made. Senate Minority Leader Doug Beck mentioned some of the information shared with him during a Senate Minority Caucus press conference on January 22. Senator Moon and Senator Steven Roberts will allow submission of online testimony for committees they chair. Lieutenant Governor David Wasinger discussed the need for video recording of Senate work in a January 26 news story shared with various television stations.

The goal is that with the commitment of these elected officials and disability focused organizations, the Senate will become as accessible as the House.

MISSOURI CAPITOL POLICE RESOURCES FOR CAPITOL VISITORS

by Chief Zim Schwartze, Missouri Capitol Police

The Missouri Capitol Police (MCP) have several important resources available. They have access to ‘medical bags’ for basic medical assistance and a procedure in place to work closely with our local medical emergency responders to ensure a prompt response.

MCP has two trained and certified K-9 Teams who are trained in explosive detection. In addition, one K-9 Team can search for missing and lost persons.

MCP has worked closely with the state’s facilities staff to continue improving access for those with limited mobility, making entrance/exit to the Capitol building easier.

The Missouri Capitol Police are always willing to assist visitors to our beautiful state Capitol.

“Great planning meeting as we prepare for the annual Disability Rights Legislative Day at the Capitol on Feb. 25, 2026. Thank you to (from left) Laura Mueth, with Missouri Office of Administration's Governor’s Council on Disability; Nicole Lynch with Emmaus Homes; Missouri Capitol Police Chief Zim Schwartze; Christina Ingoglia, Director of Policy Advocacy with the Missouri Developmental Disabilities Council; and MCP Captain Brian Kempker.”

SEEING BEYOND SIGHT: HONORING LOW VISION AWARENESS MONTH

by Claudia Browner

February is Low Vision Awareness Month, a time to raise understanding about low vision and celebrate the independence, resilience, and contributions of people who experience vision loss. Low vision affects millions of individuals and looks different for everyone—yet it often goes unseen and misunderstood.

Low vision isn't the same as total blindness. It's a spectrum that can include blurred vision, blind spots, reduced peripheral vision, or difficulty seeing in low light—even with glasses or contacts.

Because many visual challenges aren't obvious, people with low vision often face barriers that others may not realize exist. Reading a menu, crossing a busy street, recognizing faces, or using digital devices may require adaptive tools and thoughtful design. That's where awareness matters.

Advances in technology have expanded opportunities for people with low vision to live and work independently. Tools such as magnification devices, screen readers, high-contrast materials, improved lighting, and orientation aids such as the white cane are not symbols of limitation—they are tools of empowerment that promote confidence and self-sufficiency.

The white cane is more than a mobility aid—it's a symbol of independence, confidence, and communication. For those who use it, the cane provides vital information about the environment, helping detect obstacles, changes in terrain, and safe pathways. For the rest of us, it's a clear signal to slow down, offer space, and be mindful. Awareness fosters respect: giving right of way, keeping pathways clear, and avoiding distractions when someone is navigating with a cane can make a meaningful difference.

Awareness is only the first step, but it's action that creates positive change. Technology is only as effective as the accessibility behind it, and thoughtful choices such as readable fonts, clear signage, good lighting, and accessible digital content help create environments where everyone can thrive.

Low Vision Awareness Month reminds us that accessibility and inclusion should be part of daily life, not limited to one month. When we design spaces, services, and communication with accessibility in mind, we create environments where everyone can participate fully.

This February, let's commit to seeing beyond assumptions, valuing independence, and supporting a community where people with low vision are recognized, respected, and empowered.

Missouri Rehabilitation Services for the Blind (RSB), a division of the Department of Social Services, supports individuals who are blind or have low vision by providing training, resources, and services that promote independence, employment, and full participation in community life. If you or someone you know is experiencing vision loss, please contact the agency for more information about their programs and services.

APPLY NOW! MO-YLF 2026

by Reece Ellis

As the new year gets underway, planning is already in full swing for the 2026 Missouri Youth Leadership Forum (MO-YLF). Applications for this unique, week-long experience have been open since November, and we want to ensure that eligible students and their families have the information they need to apply before the March deadline.

The Forum will take place July 14–18, 2026, on the University of Missouri campus in Columbia. MO-YLF is designed to help high school students with disabilities (ages 16–21) transition into adulthood with confidence. Each year, 30 delegates are selected to participate in a curriculum built on five core pillars:

- Leadership & Advocacy: Developing self-determination and participating in a mock legislative session at the State Capitol.
- History & Culture: Connecting with mentors and peers to explore the legacy of the disability rights movement.
- Career & College Readiness: Practical workshops to prepare for higher education, employment, and life after high school.
- Community & Friendship: Networking with young leaders from across the state and building lifelong support systems.
- Recreation & Fun: Experiencing campus life through adaptive sports, social events, and a talent show.

We understand that for many students, this may be their first time away from home. To provide peace of mind for families, MO-YLF provides 24-hour on-site nursing care and overnight dorm supervision. Thanks to our generous sponsors, the entire program—including housing and meals—is offered at no cost to selected delegates.

The application window is currently open, and the deadline to apply is March 16, 2026.

Students, parents, and educators can find application materials and more information at disability.mo.gov/gcd/ylf

NOW RECRUITING: 2026 VOLUNTEER STAFF

While delegates are applying, we are also building our 2026 Volunteer Staff team! We are looking for passionate individuals—especially MO-YLF alumni—to lead, mentor, and support our delegates on campus this July.

If you are a professional in the disability community, a teacher, a college student, or a former delegate, we encourage you to apply. This is a rewarding way to grow professionally while making a direct impact.

- Staff Training & Arrival: July 13, 2026
- Staff Application Deadline: April 1, 2026
- Apply to Volunteer: disability.mo.gov/gcd/ylf/volunteer.htm

If you have questions about MO-YLF, upcoming informational webinars, or other youth programs, please contact Reece Ellis at reece.ellis@oa.mo.gov or 573-751-2600.

Please help us share this leadership opportunity with the students and colleagues in your network!

MISSOURI YOUTH LEADERSHIP FORUM
VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITY
July 13–18, 2026
at MU in Columbia
What topics are covered?
Self-Advocacy
Disability Pride
Assistive Technology
Independent Living
Employment Skills
Higher Education
Legislative Advocacy
Mentorship
Community Service
And more!
Volunteer Staff Needed!
Apply by April 1!
The Missouri Youth Leadership Forum is a leadership program designed for young adults with disabilities to learn from successful leaders and role models.
Apply for one of our volunteer staff positions to support the youth participants at this week-long, empowering program on MU Campus!
Make a positive difference in the lives of young adults with disabilities and gain professional leadership experience and connections.
Learn more about this exciting volunteer opportunity at https://disability.mo.gov/gcd/ylf
Questions?
573-751-2600
gcd@oa.mo.gov

NAVIGATING NEW TAX BENEFITS FOR MISSOURI SENIORS IN 2026

by Reece Ellis

As the 2026 tax filing season begins, Missouri seniors *may* notice significant changes to their returns. Recent federal legislation and updated state laws have introduced new ways for taxpayers age 65 and older to reduce their taxable income. Here is a clear breakdown of what you need to know.

Starting with the 2025 tax year, a new federal tax provision inside the law now known as the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) allows eligible seniors to claim a "bonus" deduction.

Eligible individuals can deduct up to $6,000. For married couples filing jointly where both spouses are 65 or older, the total deduction is $12,000. To be eligible you must turn 65 on or before December 31, 2025. Unlike many other tax breaks, you can claim this $6,000 bonus even if you do not itemize your deductions.

This benefit is designed for middle-income households. The deduction begins to decrease if your income (Modified Adjusted Gross Income) exceeds $75,000 for individuals or $150,000 for married couples. It is completely phased out for individuals earning over $175,000 or couples earning over $250,000.

This new $6,000 bonus does not replace the existing standard deduction; instead, it is added on top of it. For 2025, here is how the totals compare for those who do not itemize:

Filing Status (Age 65+)	Standard Deduction	Additional Senior Deduction	New "Bonus" Deduction	Total Potential Deduction
Single	$15,750	$2,000	$6,000	$23,750
Married (Joint)	$31,500	$3,200	$12,000	$46,700

There is often confusion regarding whether Social Security benefits are taxed. The answer depends on whether you are looking at your federal or state return.

At the Federal Level, Social Security benefits may be partially taxed if your "combined income" (your adjusted gross income plus half of your Social Security benefits) exceeds $25,000 for individuals or $32,000 for couples. However, the new $6,000 bonus deduction is expected to help many retirees stay below the threshold where their benefits become taxable.

Since 2024, Missouri law has become much simpler. Social Security benefits are 100% exempt from Missouri state income tax, regardless of your income level or filing status. This means while you might owe federal tax on a portion of your benefits, you will not owe Missouri state tax on them.

If you use tax-preparation software, the program should automatically flag your eligibility once you enter your date of birth. If you are preparing a paper return (Form 1040 or 1040-SR), be sure to check the "65 or older" box and include accurate Social Security numbers for all filers to ensure the IRS calculates your deduction correctly.

If you are looking for assistance with preparing your tax return, please visit the National Disability Institute's website for a listing of free tax preparation services for people with disabilities, low-income individuals and families and seniors, including the IRS Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program.

Disclaimer: ***This article is intended for informational purposes only and is not professional tax advice. If you have specific questions about preparing and filing your taxes or need personalized assistance, please consult a tax professional.***

FEBRUARY IS NATIONAL LIBRARY LOVERS' MONTH

by Dara Sailler, Office of Equal Opportunity

February isn't just a month full of love for couples and families. It's also when we celebrate National Library Lovers' Month!

Because of the shift to digital resources, libraries are often overlooked. Libraries provide vital community resources like free internet, job help, literacy programs, safe public spaces, and social connection. You can often find free courses, skill development, community activities, music and streaming services, and a quiet place to study.

Of course, don't forget about the books! If physical books aren't your cup of tea, many libraries offer e-books and audio books as well as TV shows and music digitally. The best part of libraries is it's still a free resource for your community!

This February, try and visit your local library. You can support them in many ways. One way is to sign up for a library card. They are of no cost but show that libraries are still a vital part of every community. Sign up for Friends of the Library or even just shop their book sales. Many times, there are hidden gems for very little money. Happy reading!

WOLFNER LIBRARY SERVICES

by Kim Hicks, Office of Equal Opportunity

Wolfner Library is a free library service for Missourians of all ages who are unable to read standard print materials due to low vision, blindness, physical disability or reading disability.

- There is no charge for the following:
- Loan of audio, Braille and large print books and magazines
- Loan of digital audio players
- Audiobook downloads available 24 hours a day through the website
- Accessible newspapers and magazines
- Free shipping through the United States Postal Service

9,000+ Missourians use the Wolfner Library. The collection includes fiction, nonfiction, audio, Braille, large print, as well as digital playback machines. For more information visit Wolfner Library Services

DOLLY PARTON'S IMAGINATION LIBRARY OF MISSOURI

by Kim Hicks, Office of Equal Opportunity

Did you know children can receive free books through the Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education - Office of Childhood and Dolly Parton's Imagination Library?

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library is a book gifting program that mails free, high quality, age-appropriate books to children from birth to age five, regardless of their family's income.

In order to receive books, a parent or guardian must register their child on the Imagination Library national website.

Books are mailed directly to the homes of registered children every month.

To get started, scan the QR code, and start enjoying free books!

LEGISLATIVE EDUCATION PROJECT
WEBINARS
GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL ON DISABILITY
REGISTER ONLINE
https://tinyurl.com/GCD-LEP
Learn about the legislative process in Missouri and how to become active in creating positive public policies for people with disabilities.
https://disability.mo.gov/gcd/LEP.htm

Legislative Education Project (LEP) Webinars

Empower yourself to advocate for public policies that impact individuals with disabilities in Missouri.

Register for one of the upcoming, free LEP webinars at tinyurl.com/GCD-LEP

Learn more about the program on the LEP website

UPCOMING EVENTS

Check out these upcoming disability-related conferences and events! Click on the links to learn more or register.

February 22, 2026
Disability Awareness Convention, hosted by The Arya Foundation, Chesterfield

February 25, 2026
Disability Rights Legislative Day, Jefferson City

May 27 - 29, 2026
Missouri Rehabilitation Association (MRA) Conference, Lake Ozark

July 14 - 18, 2026
Missouri Youth Leadership Forum, Columbia

If you know of other events you would like us to share with the disability community, please contact our office.

DISABILITY RIGHTS LEGISLATIVE DAY

February 25, 2026
Missouri State Capitol, Jefferson City
Register now at drld.org

To learn about more about Disability Rights Legislative Day (DRLD) and what to expect at the rally, sign up now for a free DRLD Training webinar on February 10.

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GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL ON DISABILITY

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